

Debate

Defining the profession? Exploring an international definition of social work in the China context

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Global social work defies concise definition. In this article, the key terms of the definition of social work formulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) are critically analysed. It is argued that this definition cannot claim to be 'universal' given the assumptions on which it is built and the rapidly changing global society in which social work is undertaken. This is demonstrated in the form of an analysis of social welfare provision and its implications for contemporary social work in China to assess whether the IFSW definition is applicable in this context. The conclusion is that the emerging aims and practice of social work in China are likely to be quite different from those in the West, and that the IFSW definition of social work has value as a point of reference rather than as a definitive definition or a statement of intent. Failure to recognise the limitations of a global definition risks ignoring the lived experience of social workers in China and those they work with.

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Introduction

The relationship between globalisation and social work, what it is and what it should or could be, is contested (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006; Ife, 2000; Lyons, 2006; Sewpaul, 2006; Webb, 2003). There is little consensus on the phenomenon of globalisation itself with its 'multi-faceted dimensions' and 'complex processes' (Midgely, 2001), reflecting the amalgamation of 'national interests and international capital that has controlled global, regional and national economies for some time' (Ife, 2000: 50). It is claimed that globalisation requires social work to transcend its preoccupation with the 'local and contextualise its role within a broad, global setting' (Midgely, 2001: 24).

Globalisation is appropriately a concern of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) who define it as 'the process by which all peoples and communities come to experience an increasingly common economic, social and cultural environment' (IFSW, 2004a). Development of a global definition of social work began in 1994, pioneered by Elis Envall, the then Swedish IFSW president who advocated that social

work must redefine its core identity in light of globalisation (Hare, 2004: 407). Envall established a taskforce of representatives from the IFSW regions whose mission included an extensive literature review and consultation with social work practitioners and academics, and representatives of national and international organisations. In 2000, the IFSW agreed on the following global definition, ratified in 2001 by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW):

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW, 2000)

The definition is supported by a 'commentary' on social work as 'an interrelated system of values, theory and practice' and was a crucial step in the process of defining global standards for social work education (Joint Committee IFSW and IASSW, 2002). However,

the latter are criticised for assuming that a Western perspective is universal, positioning social work as an 'agent of colonisation' (Coates et al., 2006: 382). Universalising discourse characterised by 'western imperialist intentions and practices hold potential to dilute or even annihilate local cultures and traditions and to deny context specific realities' (Sewpaul, 2006: 421). Haug suggests that social work needs to be 'challenged to not only expand its scope of inclusion but to actively reverse the colonialist direction of knowledge transfer' (in Coates et al., 2006: 384).

We agree that social work needs to move 'beyond dualistic and deterministic beliefs that separate professional knowledge and lived experience and that stand in the way of seeing indigenous perspectives as legitimate and credible' (Coates et al., 2006: 384). We applaud attempts to reconcile the universal and the local (Coates et al., 2006; Sewpaul, 2006; Yip, 2004), but suggest that they do not sufficiently explore tensions in the integration of the 'universals' of the global definition with the 'context specific reality' (Sewpaul, 2006: 421) of non-democratic countries such as mainland China. Failure to reconcile the local and the universal raises the question of whether a global definition should be abandoned or treated as a point of reference rather than a definitive statement.

Following a brief discussion of key methodological issues in researching this article, we analyse social welfare provision in contemporary mainland China (hereafter referred to as China), focusing on aspects relevant to the global definition. A nation's welfare system and structure form the paradigm for the emerging tradition of social work and social work education, underlining the socially constructed nature of both (Tsang & Yan, 2001). Detail about China's social welfare tradition is included to underline the discrepancy between the Western democratic tradition and that of China. Core concepts in the global definition are then critically analysed in relation to China. We conclude by arguing that the best a global definition can offer social work in China is a reference point (W. M. Kwong, personal communication) on a journey to its own emerging tradition. Failure to recognise the limitations of a global definition risks ignoring the lived experience of social workers in China and those they work with.

Methodology

Paradoxically, given the above critique of a Western imperialist position, the authors acknowledge that this article is written from a white Western perspective. Hutchings writes through the lens of her experience of living in China as a child during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and Taylor from her experience of working with social work educators in Hong Kong from 2004 to 2006. Representing voices from one world to another

is always intensely political given the paradoxes of relationships between different worlds and the one-way cultural flow of ideas (Penn, 1999). Nevertheless, we offer an arm's length perspective as a contribution to a politically sensitive debate.

The article is based on a search of three streams of English language literature. First, resources were provided by British-based China analysts, including those from political science and history (Adams & Hannum, 2005; Du, 2004; Howell, 2004; Hutchings, 2000; Mullaly, 1997; Naughton, 2005; White, 1998; White & Goodman, 1998), enabling the building of a critical analysis of the evolution of contemporary China. Second, a search was made of the emerging scholarly literature on social work in China from the 1980s, when modern social work was introduced, to the present day. Third, literature on social work and globalisation enabled an understanding of current concepts. The internet provided access to materials at field level such as newspapers and information on local organisations. In addition, Hutchings corresponded with Hong Kong-based social work educators Leung and Pearson, and Taylor with Kwong.

There is, as yet, little empirical evidence to draw on about social work or social work education in China, with the exception of a study by Canadian-based social work educators Yan and Tsang (2005), who undertook a Delphi study designed to explore Chinese social work educators' understanding of the meanings and functions of social work in China. Between 1999 and 2001 they interviewed (face to face and by phone) educators in Beijing and Toronto. After the first round of interviews, narrative data were summarised and fed back to the interviewees. Forty-six respondents were interviewed in the first round and 47 in the second. Despite methodological gaps in the paper, crucially, for example, how many respondents had professional qualifications and where these were obtained, the empirical data are nevertheless important when so little are available.

Social welfare in contemporary China

Discussion of China's development during the past 50 years must begin by acknowledging the extraordinary upheavals that the country has experienced. Of primary importance is the Communist Revolution of 1949 when Mao Zedong declared the foundation of the People's Republic of China. For the first time in Chinese history, the state became totally responsible for the welfare needs of its citizens (Tsang & Yan, 2001). In urban areas, social welfare provision was primarily undertaken by the '*danwei*', or unit of employment (government offices or factories, etc.) to which all Chinese citizens were attached. In rural areas, welfare facilities were delivered by agricultural cooperatives and, following the Great Leap Forward, by rural communes (Leung, 2001). Leung (2001) suggests that this form of welfare

provision was distinctive in that it was comprehensive. However, almost from the beginning of the Communist period, rural welfare services were relatively marginal and limited to small amounts of material relief (White, 1998). During the era of Mao (and his successors), disparities between urban and rural communities were a function of China's size as well as its development policy.

Nevertheless, from the early 1950s, the *danwei* provided a range of 'social' services for their employees, including education for the employees' children, healthcare provision, entertainment and social clubs (the focus of which was ideological education). They acted as 'small societies . . . and . . . micro-welfare states', and central to this whole system was a guarantee of lifelong employment (White, 1998: 177). Concerns about social justice were at the fore (Smith, 2003), exemplified by the Marriage Law of 1950 that freed women from arranged marriages and enabled them to acquire property of their own (Hutchings, 2000).

The China Communist Party (hereafter the Party) was determined to address social problems, including prostitution, gambling, venereal diseases, begging, drug addiction and unemployment (Leung, 1995). Such problems were viewed as originating from capitalist systems (Mullaly, 1997). The Party promoted and enforced ideological education and participation in productive labour as an effective means to eradicate problems, and neither public nor scholarly discussion of social problems was allowed as that would amount to criticism of the socialist system (Leung, 1994). In the mid-1950s, the Party declared that it had eliminated poverty and unemployment. Consequently, no official figures on unemployment and poverty were released until 1978 (Leung, 2001).

Following Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping defined the Party's principal task as that of modernising China. State control and central planning would yield to market forces and China would play its full part in the global economy after decades of relative isolation. Land was decollectivised and industry decentralised. Competition was promoted by encouraging foreign trade, investment and the creation of joint ventures (Hutchings, 2000). The one-child-per-family policy was introduced in 1979, although people in the countryside could generally have two children and ethnic minorities were exempted from the legislation altogether (Hutchings, 2000).

The end of communes and state-owned enterprises meant the end of comprehensive state welfare provision. The decline was not always immediate: in 2001 *danwei* were still providing a third of schools and 40 per cent of hospitals (Leung, 2001). However, numbers of those employed in private enterprises, individual entrepreneurs and the unemployed all increased substantially (Leung, 2001; Smith, 2003).

These rapid changes led to the emergence of new social problems including family breakdown, a rising school dropout rate and mass unemployment, exacerbated by the weakening of traditional 'safety nets' (Adams & Hannum, 2005: 100). The sheer numbers of those confronting problems is striking (Tsang & Yan, 2001). China, with just over 1.3 billion people, continues to have the largest population in the world, and, partly because of draconian population measures, has become one of the most rapidly ageing societies in the world. The Party attributed increasing social problems to two factors: the 'corrupting influence of the West' and 'insufficient ideological education at grass roots level' (Leung, 1995: 404). This sustained the view that the socialist system remains 'superior in solving social problems which cannot be solved satisfactorily in capitalist societies' (Leung, 1995: 404).

The government oversees social welfare provisions through the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and organisations such as the Communist Youth League and The All-China Women's Federation are, in effect, arms of the government (Tsang & Yan, 2001). Responsibility for financial support of existing welfare institutions has, in the main, been transferred to individual communities with the aim of keeping government expenditure to a minimum (Shang, Wu & Wu, 2005: 123). Neighbourhood street offices and residents' committees provide a variety of public and social functions (Leung, 2001: 18). However, remote rural communities are often unable to raise the revenue to provide similar services (Leung & Wong, 2002: 211).

'Cadres', or 'governmental employees engaged in administrative, professional and political tasks' (Leung, 1994: 417), are considered by some to represent a form of indigenous social work (Cheung & Liu, 2004: 114). However, they are low status, low paid and their work is regarded as a 'menial job done by laid-off workers' (Lee, 2005: 2). In 2001, there were an estimated 500,000 union cadres, 200,000 Communist Youth League cadres, 10,000 Women's IFSW cadres and 700,000 urban neighbourhood community service cadres. A further 3.5 million village cadres and over 9 million neighbourhood based mediators provided mediating services for families. Cadres complete in-house training which emphasises 'leadership and ideological training' (Leung, 2001: 17). Their work comprises 'experiential advice and informal support . . . political education . . . direct instruction, guidance and a behaviour model' (Leung, 2001: 21). They adopt an authoritarian approach (Leung, 2001: 23). They encourage income-generating activity to finance welfare services (Leung, 1995). They enforce the one-child policy and filial obligations, and administer fines, sanctions and rewards to promote 'ideal' behaviour. The cadre role reflects the Party's mantra that individual needs must be 'subordinated' to national interests (Leung, 2001: 21). Their focus on

economic development reflects priorities of the political agenda.

The role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as providers of welfare services has been limited (White, 1998) but is growing rapidly (Naughton, 2005). Following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the government clamped down on NGOs (Du, 2004). However, they are now no longer required to have background checks before they are established, although the government has retained control. This new environment was partly a result of the United Nations's (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and the growth of contact between China and the outside world during the 1990s. Such developments have allowed international NGOs to work in China and have also encouraged the emergence of home-grown organisations (Howell, 2004).

Confucianism remains the dominant (though not the sole) belief system in China. Central to its teachings is the concept of reciprocity, and core values include filial piety and absolute loyalty to one's family. Familial relations are patriarchal and hierarchical and this order exists in all social relationships with strict adherence to ceremony and ritual in social and political affairs (Yip, 2004). Jiang Zemin, then Party leader, described Confucianism as a 'fine national tradition' (White & Goodman, 1998: 9). Its principles were advocated as a means of achieving social stability or harmony (Hutchings, 2000). Its re-acceptance has enabled the government to re-emphasise 'family responsibility and obligation' to meet social welfare needs (White & Goodman, 1998: 13). The Chinese constitution states that 'it is the duty of the parents to support and bring up their children before they enter into adulthood, while the children assume the responsibility of supporting and helping their parents. . . . Any ill treatment of old people is prohibited' (cited in Zhang, 1986: 116). It is a criminal offence for adult children to refuse to care for aged family members, making China one of the few countries to enforce an individual's obligation to family through legislation (Leung, 2001). However, individuals are expected to depend on families when they are weakened by rapid social change. Some 113 million rural migrants are estimated to have left their homes to find jobs, leaving behind older people and children to fend for themselves (Shang et al., 2005).

Many of these developments gathered pace under the leadership of Hu Jintao, Party General Secretary, and Premier Wen Jiabao. Both men placed greater emphasis than their predecessors on assisting socially vulnerable groups and developing greater transparency in government systems (Naughton, 2005). However, they have done so on condition that the people agree to boundaries established by the Party and accept its political dominance. Publicly debating alternatives and promoting social change may be perceived as criticism, and the

government is likely to take repressive action against those who transgress (Howell, 2004; Naughton, 2005).

Social work and social work education in contemporary China

In its recognisable 'modern' form, social work in China is less than 20 years old. The 'unabashedly political' goal of developing social work is to assist the developing economy by maintaining social stability (Tsang, Yan & Shera, 2000: 154). The Party today has made it clear that, like any other profession, social work will be 'delineated by the state' and expected 'to contribute to the overall goals of socialism' (Pearson & Phillips, 1994: 283).

Social work education was introduced into China in 1925, when a training course was set up in Beijing in response to the need for trained staff in organisations funded by American missionaries (Leung, 2001). However, in 1952, with the emergence of the People's Republic of China, all sociology and social work related courses were banned during the 'restructuring of institutions of higher learning' (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002: 376). Since a socialist society did not have social problems, academic analysis of such issues was unnecessary (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002). Social sciences were seen as 'bourgeois disciplines supporting the capitalist system' (Leung, 2001: 17). Thus, during the Cultural Revolution minimal attention was given to the 'development of social welfare based on empirical research and systematic conceptualisation' (Leung, 1994: 84).

With the 'open door' policy following the death of Mao, the social sciences were reinstated in university curricula. The first Chinese textbook on sociology was published in 1984, including a chapter on social work then regarded as 'applied sociology' (Leung, 1994: 84). In 1989, Peking University established its social work programme and in 1993 its students were the first to undertake fieldwork in China (Ng & Wan, 1996). By 1999, there were 30 social work programmes, located mainly in sociology departments, and approximately 200 by 2005 (Leung, personal communication). However, social work remains predominantly an academic discourse rather than a 'professional programme' (Leung, 2001: 19); only a small proportion of programmes offer a full range of social work training (Yan & Tsang, 2005), and social work educators have little practical knowledge and experience (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002). The quality of training remains unimpressive because of the severe lack of professionally trained social work educators (Yuen-Tsang, in press). However, before examining future prospects for social work and social work education in China, we turn now to the IFSW global definition of social work and its application to China.

The IFSW definition of social work and its application to China

In the following analysis of the global definition of social work in China, we examine key terms from the IFSW definition and also refer to the associated 'commentary'.

Promoting social change

'Promoting social change' may indicate a diverse range of social work activities, including intervention at local micro or larger macro levels (Hare, 2004: 411). The commentary states that:

Interventions range from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement . . . in social and political action to impact social policy and economic development (IFSW, 2000).

The IFSW recognises that it is less common for social workers to engage in social and political action than in micro action but recommends that they, in negotiation with their national associations, endeavour to pressurise governments into having an 'action plan with annual targets to reduce poverty (and) insist that social impact statements be attached to new government initiatives' (IFSW, 2000). Undertaking this work is likely to be dependent on the sociopolitical environment and the status of social workers in any given country. In liberal democracies or pluralist societies, different viewpoints are tolerated and encouraged as signs of 'democratic spirit', and dissenting perspectives are allowed as long as they do not seriously challenge the 'established order' (Pearson & Phillips, 1994: 283). Although even here, promoting social change may be difficult for state-employed social workers with a role in maintaining social control (Davies, 1985, cited in Pearson & Phillips, 1994). Social workers in NGOs may find it easier to challenge the elected government, but the relatively low status of many social workers means that it is often difficult to be politically active and effective (Beresford, 2000). In non-democratic countries, such as China, activities involving 'social change', which include criticism of government policy, may prove dangerous and result in oppression and persecution (Howell, 2004; Naughton, 2005).

Promoting problem solving and wellbeing

'Problems' and 'wellbeing' are central to social work practice and, since its inception, social work has been concerned with 'meeting human needs and developing human potential' (IFSW, 2000). However, we have seen that 'problems' are determined by 'social structure, resources, traditions, values, attitudes, politics and power dynamics' (Qiao & Chan, 2005: 26). For example,

prostitution is illegal in China, and the government has refused to acknowledge the needs of sex workers who represent an 'erosion of socialist morals', blaming the workers rather than their customers (Du, 2004: 189). Similarly, 'wellbeing' is identified by the UN as a product of the 'cultural community' in which an individual is situated (Pollard & Davidson, 2001, cited in Hare, 2004: 410).

In 'promoting' problem solving and wellbeing, social workers are viewed as 'participants in service user's autonomous efforts to work on their own problems, rather than as 'expert' therapists', or professional fixers of service user problems' (Davies, 1977, cited in Payne, 2002: 276). We have seen, however, that the Party tradition in China is one of direct instruction, education and guidance, antithetical to Western practice theory that supports autonomy, choice and control.

Empowerment and liberation

'Liberation' and 'empowerment' are politicised terms and it is questionable how welcome these notions are in any non-democratic regimes, including China. Empowerment has many definitions. A comprehensive definition is provided by Gutiérrez, an American academic:

Empowerment is the process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations. It is a means of addressing the problems of powerless populations and the role powerlessness plays in creating and perpetuating social problems in both developing and developed societies. (Gutiérrez, 1995, cited in Hare, 2004: 413)

Hare (2004), also American, argues that this definition demonstrates that empowerment is universal to social work processes. In China, the notion of empowering people, with its implications of doing so 'against the authorities', would be viewed as suspicious (V. Pearson, personal communication). The Yan and Tsang (2005) study confirms that social work in China is viewed as having an explicit political mandate shaped by Party parameters. Seventy per cent of their respondents identify the function of social work as being to maintain social stability.

Equally, a widely understood meaning of the term 'liberate' is 'to make free', and it is clear from the discussion of social welfare in China that liberation as political freedom would not be accepted. Social work is an agent of the state and the extent to which it can be expected to promote and achieve 'liberation' from oppression of the kind perpetuated by governmental and ideological structures is questionable.

A Freirean perspective views empowerment as essential in the development of indigenous knowledge, yet in China there is a tradition of authority monopolising

knowledge. For example, traditional teachers will hold back some of their knowledge to maintain the 'upper-hand' over students (Chan & Chan, 2005: 382). If social work students are not empowered to critique their teachers, creativity and the development of new ideas will be stifled, thus hindering the expansion of indigenous knowledge (Chan & Chan, 2005). This, in turn, will prevent the 'liberation' of social work from Western dominance. Moreover, if social workers maintain an authoritative role, they will not learn from the 'wisdom and expertise of people in the community' and how these experiences can be used to bring about culturally appropriate means of meeting social problems (Ife, 2003: 5).

Theories of human behaviour and social systems and people and their environments

Within Western social work, there is little consensus about what constitutes contemporary social work theory. It has been argued that its loosely defined nature allows practitioners to select knowledge to enable practice in a variety of settings (Hare, 2004: 414). Western social work theory has been uncritically transferred to 'developing countries', raising the notion of 'professional imperialism' (Midgley, 1981, cited in Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999: 261). The IFSW recognises this problem and states that social work should develop theory from 'local and indigenous knowledge specific to its context' (IFSW, 2000). We return later to explore the complex issue of indigenisation in the China context.

Principles of human rights

The IFSW emphasises the themes of human rights and social justice in social work (Lyons, 1999: 9). This is consolidated through its special consultative status with the UN, which collaborated to produce a human rights and social work manual (IFSW, 1996). The IFSW states that human rights 'condenses into two words the struggle for dignity and fundamental freedoms, which allow the full development of human potential. Civil and political rights have to be accompanied by economic, social and cultural rights' (IFSW, 1996).

The IFSW promotes the universality of human rights; however, Yip convincingly argues that the 'universal' nature of human rights is undermined by its highly Westernised ideologies of 'individualism, democracy and Christianity' (Yip, 2004: 604). Asian cultural values, including Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism and/or Islam, tend to emphasise 'collectivity rather than individuality, and responsibility rather than human rights' (Yip, 2004: 604). Confucian values focus on the 'self' as a 'relational being and not an independent, abstract entity as in the West' (Lam, 1996:

11). Traditional hierarchies in social and family life form an important consideration in an individual's decision-making (Tam, 2003). In promoting human rights as a core value, the IFSW is inadvertently asserting the 'universality of western social work values' (Tsang et al., 2000: 150).

Principles of social justice

Social justice is defined as 'An ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits' (Reamer, 1998, cited in Hare, 2004: 416). It means 'challenging negative discrimination, recognising diversity, distributing resources equitably and challenging unjust policies and practices' (Yip, 2004: 602). The IFSW commentary states that social work values are based on 'respect for the equality, worth and dignity of all people' (IFSW, 2000).

Like the concept of human rights, the term social justice reflects Western, individualistic and democratic ideals and therefore may not be easily understood or promoted in some cultures. Hare (2004) notes that the concept of social justice has motivated social workers to engage in social action. Again, some governments or dominant groups may deal out harsh treatment to those who challenge prevailing ideologies and beliefs. China's current government has made a greater commitment to vulnerable groups than its predecessors, yet it remains a conservative country and continues to govern social issues by controlling the media and research agendas, and containing individuals who draw attention to marginalised groups (Howell, 2004). If the emerging tradition of social work in China continues to maintain a close relationship with government, social workers are likely to be restricted to those causes they can champion and how they do so.

Ways forward?

We have sought to demonstrate that the IFSW definition of social work with its roots in highly westernised ideologies of 'individualism, democracy and Christianity' (Yip, 2004: 604) does not sit comfortably in China's unique socioeconomic and political setting. However, this is not a wholly negative verdict. As indicated earlier, social welfare, social work and social work education in China are undergoing huge change. A key question is whether as social work emerges it will fit the global definition, or whether China will develop its own version of social work specific to its context, recognising this may 'break away' from the global definition? The direction taken appears likely to depend on that of the social work workforce and its relationship to indigenisation.

Indigenisation of social work in China is not new. In 1988, at a seminar on Social Work Education in the

Asian and Pacific Region organised by Peking University, China's State Education Commissioner argued that the dilemma facing social work education was 'to absorb the distinguished achievements of other countries while firmly grounding on the realities of China' (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002: 378). Thus, social work educators in China both seek recognition and support from the international community at the same time as they try and define their own identity and characteristics (Yan & Tsang, 2005; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002). It is argued that indigenisation should be consolidated with authentisation (Cheung & Liu, 2004). Indigenisation is 'the process of relating social work function and education to the cultural, economic, political, and social realities of a particular country' (Resnick, 1976, cited in Cheung & Liu, 2004: 112). Authentisation is the 'identification of genuine and authentic roots in the local system, which would be used for guiding its future development in a mature, relevant and original fashion' (Ragab, 1982, cited in Cheung & Liu, 2004: 112).

The concept of 'Chinese Corpus, Western Application' dates back to the mid-19th century and argues that Western social work technology ('Application') can be introduced and assimilated into the region without requiring substantial change to the existing cultural and social structures of China ('Corpus') (Tsang & Yan, 2001: 435). This approach, however, is criticised for positioning Western and Chinese knowledge as 'binary opposites', oversimplifying these two positions as 'monolithic systems' rather than 'intersecting and contesting discourses' (Tsang et al., 2000: 151). Yip (2004) provides illuminating case examples of how Chinese culture could intersect with IFSW Global Standards.

But what about authentisation in 'Chinese Corpus, Western Application'? The current dominance of Hong Kong-based educators in leading the development of social work education in China would suggest that clinical approaches such as solution-focused therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy, popular in Hong Kong and in which many educators were trained in North America, will prevail. Furthermore, clinical approaches may suit a government at best suspicious of radical structural change. Eighty-three per cent of Chinese social work educators identified the most important social work function as being to raise the quality of life of individuals, and 70 per cent identified the importance of fostering harmonious family relationships (Yan & Tsang, 2005). However, critics argue that clinical approaches are too costly for a populous and poor country such as China, which is 'yet to solve some of its more urgent basic social needs such as housing, medical care, education and poverty' (Leung, 1994: 89). Professor Wang Sibin of Beijing University is at the forefront in this debate, arguing that 'social

development and poverty alleviation should be the primary focus of social work education in China. Individualised practice should only be . . . supplementary' (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002: 379). The aim of social work education is to produce future policy makers, who will emphasise 'community integration and social development' (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002: 382).

Recent Western literature has emphasised the usefulness of social development (Ife, 2003; Midgley, 2001) and the IFSW recognises the value of 'striving for social justice, human rights and social development through the development of social work' (IFSW, 2004b). Social development perspectives consider economic and social processes as 'two sides of the same coin' (Midgley, 1998: 196) and this theory clearly complies with China's existing approach to social work and social welfare (Smith, 2003). However, the social development approach has been criticised for not promoting social change (Payne, 1997). Western constructs of social development, empowerment and advocacy should not be viewed as 'magic spells that can alleviate poverty and inequality', and cultures such as Confucianism and Buddhism have as much to offer in attempts to resolve contemporary human problems (Yip, 2005). There is a 'genuine need to develop practice theories to be congruent with the socio-cultural milieu of contemporary Chinese society' (Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang, in press).

Coates and colleagues argue that all efforts to accommodate diversity have reached a 'theoretical impasse, since a paradox exists as the foundational, universalising beliefs of mainstream social work have not been successful in accommodating or integrating . . . indigenous perspectives' (Coates et al., 2006: 384). However, this may not yet be evident in China where neither 'mainstream' nor 'indigenous' social work has been adequately theorised. Coates further argues that social work will never be able to incorporate diversity effectively until it moves beyond the separation of professional knowledge and lived experience (2006). It is to this latter issue that we now turn.

Kwong, a Hong Kong-based educator firmly rooted in practice theory and context, argues that 'the best chance of creating a home-grown social work lies in the world of practice' where relevant aspects of global social work are recreated and 'what goes on between practitioners and clients has to be linked to the meaning system of the local culture' (W. M. Kwong, personal communication). In China, a key barrier to this process is the lack of mature and critical social workers with experience in fieldwork who can develop evidence-based knowledge. Such workers could develop their own theories, models and skills within their own understanding of their practice context (Tsang et al., 2000; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002). However, lack of public knowledge of 'social work', still largely

understood as voluntary work in charities as opposed to a professional occupation, and lack of a clear and valued career path has led social work to be described as an 'awkward occupation' (Lee, 2005: 1). Lack of recognition is a major challenge for a newly emerging profession (Yan & Tsang, 2005).

Potential workforce developments include a proposal to develop 'cadres' as professional social workers (Leung & Wong, 2002). This would certainly provide a ready-made workforce and might represent a form of indigenous social work (Cheung & Liu, 2004). However, as seen earlier, a key issue would be the nature of their practice, training and supervision. Another very different, potentially significant, development is the beginning of a more liberal NGO sector. Some of China's newly qualified social workers are already employed in large NGOs such as Save the Children and Oxfam (Leung, 2001: 24). An escalation in such appointments may create a professional social work identity that is more independent from government.

The direction of social work in China will also depend to some extent on local and regional leaders and champions. There are interesting and important innovations underway led by Hong Kong educators. For example, in 2000, Hong Kong Polytechnic University embarked on a 'train the trainers' programme to train social work educators who could take up leadership in programmes in China; their approach is one of creating a community of reflective practitioners building on the strengths of the local population (Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang, in press).

Lastly, the development of an independent professional association will be important (Tsang & Yan, 2001). This could create 'an alternative space of power and a site for effective discursive engagement with the official agenda' (Yan & Tsang, 2005: 898). The China Social Worker's Association founded in 1991 (renamed the China Social Work Association in 1998), was followed in 1994 by the China Association of Social Work Education (CASWE). However, given the heavy state control of social work programmes, functions and resources, such organisations have, as yet, been unable to act autonomously and promote social or political change.

Conclusion

The long-standing tradition of Western social work has a great deal of experience to offer budding social work traditions around the world. However, Western social work has as much to learn from other cultures as to impart to them. Social work has its 'toe in the door' in China, but the development of an indigenous and professional tradition of social work will take time, as indeed occurred in Western countries where social work evolved over decades, before the forces of globalisation

made instant transfer of approaches between cultures seemingly possible. Coates and colleagues advocate a 'culturally relevant holistic approach that honours the diversity of local indigenous knowledge but also allows for some universals' (Coates et al., 2006: 395). We would argue that the IFSW definition can, at best, serve as a reference point on the journey to development of an indigenous profession in China. We can only guess whether the outcome will fit the IFSW universals, but the evidence presented here would suggest it unlikely.

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